Religious Socialization among dutch Orthodox Christians

A Pedagogical Tension Unfolds

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In Western Europe, the majority of Christian churches are confronted with a declining number of members and attendees, which reflects what is often referred to as ‚cohort replacement'; i.e. over time, older and more religious birth cohorts die out and are gradually replaced by younger and less religious birth cohorts.[1] In the Netherlands, for example, research has convincingly shown that the chance of becoming a committed churchgoer decreases for each successive birth cohort.[2] Each successive birth cohort consists of fewer religiously committed people than the previous birth cohort, which again underlines the importance of the intergenerational transmission of faith if Christian churches are to survive and thrive in the context of secular Europe. Still, within each successive birth cohort the intergenerational transmission of faith appears to be less successful.

But although the dominant trends in Western-Europe are religious decline, except for former communist Europe, there are also notable exceptions, which not only concern the increasing presence of non-Christian religions like Islam, but Christianity as well.[3] In the Netherlands, especially the more orthodox and conservative churches, like certain strict Re-Reformed churches and various Pentecostal and evangelical churches seem immune to secularization and some of these churches even experienced growth instead of decline in recent years, a phenomenon which is not typically Dutch.[4] Also in the United States or Canada, for instance, are conservative churches far less affected by religious disaffiliation and declining rates of church attendance.[5]

This phenomenon may have different causes. As regards the success of several evangelical churches in the Netherlands, we already showed elsewhere that these churches in part thrive,

1 Vgl. *Crockett, Alisdair / Voas, David*: Generations of Decline. Religious Change in 20th-Century Britain. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 45 (2006) 567–584; *Voas, David*: Explaining change over time in religious involvement. In: *Collins-Mayo, Sylvia / Dandelion, Pink* (Hg.): Religion and Youth, Farnham 2010, 25–32; *Voas, David / Crockett, Alisdair*: Religion in Britain. Neither believing nor belonging. In: Sociology 39 (2005) 11–28.

2 Vgl. *Te Grotenhuis, Manfred / Scheepers, Peer*: Churches in Dutch. Causes of Disaffiliation in the Netherlands 1937–1995. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 40 (2001) 591–606; *De Hart, Joep*: Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland, Den Haag 2014, 45–53.

3 Vgl. *Reitsma, Jan / Pelzer, Ben / Scheepers, Peer* u. a.: Believing and Belonging in Europe 1981–2007. Comparisons of Longitudinal Trends and Determinants. In: European Societies 14 (2012) 611–632.

4 Vgl. *Becker, Jos / de Hart, Joep*: Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie, Den Haag 2006, 30f.

5 Vgl. *Putnam, Robert / Campbell, David*: American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites Us, New York 2010, 100–109; *Bibby, Reginald*: Restless Gods. The Renaissance of Religion in Canada, Toronto 2002, 72–82.

because they manage to attract both switchers from other Christian denominations as well as previously non-affiliated Dutch converts as a result of very typical religious and organizational characteristics.[6] But in light of the aforementioned process of cohort replacement, it is equally interesting to explore to what extent the success of orthodox or conservative churches is also due to more successful processes of religious socialization in the family. Using recently gathered data among the membership of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands of near megachurch size, we will address the following, twofold research question: *Do the children of Dutch evangelicals attend church more often than the offspring of mainline Christians and, if so, which decisive factors determine the church attendance of the children of these Dutch evangelicals?* Addressing this question, first of all, adds to a better understanding of the importance of familial, religious socialization processes in explaining conservative church growth in a secular country like the Netherlands. However, as will become clear in the reflection on our most important research findings, studying the intergenerational transmission of faith in orthodox or conservative families in the end also confronts us with a profound pedagogical dilemma regarding religious education in school.

1. *Theoretical framework*

A main assumption underlying this article is, first of all, that evangelicals are more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their children. One often heard argument for this assumption is, that orthodox and conservative Christians, like evangelicals, have bigger families which simply increases the odds that they are successful in passing their faith on to the next generation.[7] Secondly, next to this ‚demographic' factor, it is sometimes also stated that conservative Christians put more emphasis on a religious upbringing in the family, resulting in much higher retention rates among orthodox and conservative Christians than among mainline Protestants and Catholics.[8] This latter argument rests on the broadly accepted notion, that being raised in a religious family by religious parents is almost a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for adult religious commitment.[9] Since this notion goes for the process of religious socialization as such, evangelical Christians may not be very unique in this respect. Still, they may add something to this process, which could explain why they are more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their children than mainline Christians. In this regard, three additional factors could be of importance.

To begin with, since orthodox or conservative Christians, like evangelicals, put more emphasis on the religious upbringing of their children, present-day evangelical parents presumably have themselves also enjoyed a far more intense religious socialization as youths than present-day mainline parents. This juvenile experience may urge evangelical parents to also take the religious upbringing of their own children more seriously. For, as research both in the United States and the Netherlands has shown, conservative Protestants value conformity in their children over autonomy and, therefore, are far more keen to transmit their religious commitment to their children.[10] But evangelicals not only strive for conformity. They also maintain, what Smith calls, a ‚subcultural identity', which distinguishes them from the surrounding culture and strengthens the internal cohesion of their congregations and results in close intra-group affective bonds.[11] Consequently, children born in evangelical families are likely to be raised in an overt religious environment in which parents and other family members alike display high levels of religious commitment, which functions as a kind of supportive plausibility structure and important endorsement for the religious commitment of the child.[12] Finally, evangelicals are also generally considered to be more strict religious believers who, for instance, put great emphasis on the authority of the Bible or emphasize that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is unique.[13] A kind of religious strictness, which at the same time instils a deep sense of responsibility to proselytize among non-Christians and to do all they can to socialize their own children into the faith.[14]

On the basis of the above considerations, four hypotheses may be stated as to why the religious transmission among evangelicals is more successful resulting in higher levels of church attendance for their children: Evangelicals are more successful in this respect, because they have bigger families (H1); because they have themselves been intensely socialized in the faith as youths (H2); because their children are raised in an overt religious family climate (H3); and because their religious orientation urges them to take the religious socialization of their children very seriously (H4). All four hypotheses will be tested below.

2. *Data and measurements*

2.1 Data

The data of this research were gathered in the winter of 2014–2015 when an online questionnaire was administered to the audiences of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands. These congregations self-identified as evangelical, evangelical-charismatic, as a Baptist church and one as a Nazarene church, but all had mission statements in line with the six fundamental convictions of evangelicalism listed by McGrath: ascribing absolute authority to Scripture, affirming the majesty of Jesus Christ, recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit, stressing the need for personal conversion, giving priority to evangelism and being committed to the Christian community.[15] A total of 584 evangelicals of 18 years or older filled in the online questionnaire. For sake of comparison, the online questionnaire was also distributed among a representative sample of the Dutch population of 18 years or

6 Vgl. *Vermeer, Paul/Scheepers, Peer*: Umbrellas of Conservative Beliefs. Explaining the Success of Evangelical Congregations in the Netherlands. In: Journal of Empirical Theology 30 (2017) 1–24.

7 Vgl. *Chaves, Mark*: American Religion. Contemporary Trends, Princeton 2011.

8 Vgl. *Hout, Michael/Greeley, Andrew/Wilde, Melissa*: The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States. In: American Journal of Sociology 107 (2001) 468–500.

9 Vgl. *Hunsberger, Bruce/Brown, Laurence B.*: Religious Socialization, Apostasy, and the Impact on Family Background. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 23 (1984) 239–251; *Myers, Scott*: An Interactive Model of Religiosity Inheritance. The Importance of Family Context. In: American Sociological Review 61 (1996) 858–866; *Sherkat, Darren*: Religious Socialization. Sources of Influence and Influences of Agency. In: *Dillon, Michele* (Hg.): Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, Cambridge 2003, 151–163; *Vermeer, Paul/Janssen, Jaques/Hart, Joep de*: Religious Socialization and Church Attendance in the Netherlands from 1983 to 2007. A Panel Study. In: Social Compass 58 (2011) 373–392.

10 Vgl. *Ellison, Christopher/Sherkat, Darren*: Obedience and Autonomy. Religion and Parental Values Reconsidered. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 32 (1993) 313–329; *De Roos, Simone/Iedema, Jurjen/Miedema, Siebren*: Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 43 (2004) 519–535.

11 Vgl. *Smith, Christian*: American Evangelicalism. Embattled and Thriving, Chicago 1998; *Vermeer / Scheepers* 2017 [Anm. 6].

12 Vgl. *Berger, Peter*: The Social Reality of Religion, Harmondsworth 1973.

13 Vgl. *McGrath, Alister*: Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity, Downers Grove 1995, 59–68.

14 Vgl. *Smith, Christian*: American Evangelicalism. Embattled and Thriving, Chicago 1998, 47–51.

15 Vgl. *McGrath, Alister*: Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity, Downers Grove 1995, 55–66.

older, which resulted in total of 325 completed questionnaires. Overall the entire sample thus contains 920 respondents; more information regarding the sampling can be found in Vermeer, Scheepers, Kregting and Vis.[16]

2.2 Dependent variable: church attendance of the respondent's oldest child

The respondent was asked if his or her oldest child currently attends church. Response categories range from ‚almost never' to ‚about once a week'.

2.3 Independent variable: religious affiliation of the respondent

Respondents are labelled ‚evangelical', ‚mainline Christian', which comprises both Catholics as well as members of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and ‚religious none' in case the respondent had stated not to have any religious affiliation. Furthermore, the religious affiliation of the respondent was combined with his or her level of church attendance. This is necessary, because the evangelicals were gathered through participating churches and thus are almost by definition core church members, while the non-evangelical mainline Christians, Catholics and Protestants, are part of an existing sample of the Dutch population and comprise both core church members as well as nominal members. In order to make more meaningful comparisons, we, therefore, divided the single category ‚mainline Christian' into the subcategories ‚core mainline' and ‚nominal mainline'. Core means that the respondent is a church member and also attends church at least once a month, while nominal means that the respondent is a church member who attends church less than once a month or never. Thus in this article we compare ‚core evangelicals' with ‚core mainline Christians', ‚nominal mainline Christians' and ‚religious nones'.[17]

2.4 Independent variables: religious socialization of the respondent

Respondents were socialized in the faith if they were raised in a religious way by their parents, if their parents considered a religious upbringing of importance and if Bible reading and prayer were regular activities in their homes. Furthermore, the respondent's juvenile church attendance as well as him or her being deliberately sent to a religious school are also included as two additional aspects of the religious upbringing the respondent enjoyed.[18]

2.5 Independent variables: overt religious family climate

The respondent's oldest child is raised in an overt religious family climate if the respondent's father and mother, i.e. the grandparents of the oldest child, still attend church, if the respondent's broader family still attends church, if the respondent him- of herself reads the Bible and if the oldest child was deliberately sent to a religious school.

16 Vgl. *Vermeer, Paul/Scheepers, Peer*: Thriving Evangelical congregations in the Netherlands 2014–2015. Documentation of a survey among visitors of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands in 2014–2015. DANS Data Guide 14. Amsterdam 2016, 12–14.

17 The Catholics and mainline Protestants were combined into one category, because separately these groups are too small to make meaningful comparisons. For the same reason, the orthodox Protestants (N =10) were excluded from the analyses.

18 In the Netherlands almost 60 percent of all schools are state-funded, religiously affiliated schools. Due to this majority position, religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands harbor a lot of pupils with no religious background and parents usually do not have a religious motivation for sending their children to a religiously affiliated school. In case of the Netherlands, it thus makes sense to explicitly ask if the respondents were sent to a religiously affiliated school for religious reasons as an indicator of their religious upbringing.

	Church membership				
Church attendance oldest child	Core evangelicals	Core mainliners	Nominal mainliners	Religious nones	Total (N)
Almost never	20.7	36.7	70.0	97.2	44.2 (249)
Sometimes	4.0	16.7	22.5	2.1	5.5 (31)
Once a month	7.1	13.3	5.0	0.7	5.7 (32)
Once a week	68.2	33.3	2.5	0	44.6 (251)
Total (N)l	100.0 (325)	100.0 (30)	100.0 (40)	100.0 (141)	100 (563)

Eta = .69; p < .001.

Table 1: Cross tabulation church membership respondent by church attendance respondent's oldest child (% column)

2.6 Independent variables: religious orientation of the respondent

The religious orientation of the respondent concerns his or her conviction that the Christian faith is the only true religion, a so-called mono-religious orientation, as well as a so-called intrinsic religious orientation, which means that the respondent's religious behavior is really motivated by intrinsic religious concerns.[19]

2.7 Control variables

In the analysis we control for the age of the oldest child and for the respondent's gender, age, level of education and family income.

19 Vgl. *Vermeer, Paul/Ven, Johannes van der*: Looking at the Relationship Between Religions. An Empirical Study Among Secondary School Students. In: Journal of Empirical Theology 17 (2004) 36–59; *Hill, Peter/Hood, Ralph*: Measures of Religiosity. Birmingham 1999, 144–154.

3. *Results*

To begin with, we compare the rates of church attendance of the children of evangelicals with the rates of church attendance of mainliners and religious nones. The results are displayed in Table 1, which immediately show that evangelicals are indeed more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their offspring. Core evangelicals have relatively more children who attend church on a weekly basis, i.e. 68.2 percent compared to 33.3 percent for core mainliners and 2.5 percent for nominal mainliners, and the rate of church attendance of these evangelical children is also significantly higher than the church attendance rates of the children of core and nominal mainliners and of religious nones (F (3, 562) = 165.809, $p. \leq 001$).

Thus the first part of our research question has to be answered in the affirmative: The children of the evangelicals that participated in our research do indeed attend church more often than the children of mainline Christians.

But which, then, are the factors that determine the church attendance of these evangelical children? First, we consider the so-called ‚demographic' argument and compare the number of children of evangelical Christians with the number of children of mainline Christians and religious nones (cf. Table 2).

	Core evangelicals	Core mainliners	Nominal mainliners	Religious nones
Number of children	2.18 (1.57)	2.31 (1.39)	1.90 (1.08)	1.63 (1.14)

Table 2: Mean number of children for core evangelicals, mainline core members, mainline nominal members and religious nones (SD in parentheses)

This comparison immediately shows that this argument does not hold for the Netherlands and that hypothesis 1 has to be rejected. That is to say, more orthodox and conservative Protestants, like evangelicals, do not have more children than mainline Christians. In this respect, only the difference between evangelicals and religious nones is significant (F (3, 775) = 7.924, $p. \leq 001$), but not the difference between evangelicals and mainline core and nominal Christians.

In order to test the three remaining hypotheses, we conducted a stepwise linear regression analysis and estimated five models (Table 3). Model 1 (M1) largely confirms the results of Table 2. That is to say, the church attendance of children is very much dependent on the religious affiliation as well as on the church attendance of the parents. That is to say, evangelicals and mainline Christians who attend church at least once a month, the core members, ‚produce' more religious, i.e. church attending, children than mainline Christians who attend church less frequently. Hence, a successful intergenerational transmission of faith is both a matter of religious identity and parental church attendance. However, previous religious socialization experiences of the parents have no effect here (M2). Whether or not a parent enjoyed a religious upbringing at home, attended church as a youth or was sent to a religious school has no effect on the church attendance of his or her children. This means that we also have to reject hypothesis 2. Also most aspects of the religious family climate the child finds itself in (M3) have no effect. Having grandparents or other family members who attend church or having been sent to a religious school does not affect the church attendance of children. However, having a parent who regularly reads the Bible has a strong effect on the church attendance of children, which even reduces the effect of religious affiliation by 44 percent in the case of core evangelicals and by 47.4 percent in the case of core mainliners. This is partial support for hypothesis 3. Similarly, there is also an effect of having parents with a mono-religious orientation (M4). This factor reduces the effect of religious affiliation by 29.4 percent in the case of core evangelicals and by 15.8 percent in the case of core mainline Christians, which is fairly strong support for hypothesis 4. In the final, full model (M5) these two factors remain of importance, while the additional control variables have no effect. Thus the second part of our research question has to be answered as follows: The church attendance of the children of the evangelicals that participated in our research is determined by the specific religious, evangelical identity of their parents, by their parents' level of church attendance and their practice of Bible reading as well as by the mono-religious orientation of their parents.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Religious affiliation (ref = Religious none)					
Core evangelical	.75***	.70***	.42***	.53***	.30*
Core mainline	.19***	.21*	.10*	.16***	.09
Nominal mainline	.08	.07	.08	.05	.08*
Religious socialization respondent		.10			09
Juvenile church attendance respondent		-.04			-.03
Respondent sent to religious school		.01			-.01
Church attendance respondent's father			-.06		-.11
Church attendance respondent's mother			.08		.09
Church attendance respondent's family			.07		.04
Bible reading respondent			.32***		.31***
Oldest child sent to religious school			.01		,02
Mono-religious orientation				.21**	.14*
Intrinsic religious orientation				.04	-.02
Age oldest child					-.20
Gender respondent (1 = Female)					-.01
Age respondent					.02
Education respondent (ref = higher)					
Lower					-.02
Middle					-.02
Family income respondent (ref = higher)					
Lower income					-.01
Middle income					-.01
R^2 adj.	.45	.45	.48	.47	.51
N	428	428	428	428	428

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 3: Stepwise linear regression analysis for church attendance respondent's oldest child (β)

4. *Pedagogical reflection*

Since our research is based on a, though fairly large, convenience sample of specific orthodox Christians, the above results, of course, cannot be considered representative for the total population of conservative and orthodox Christians in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, we do think that these research results give rise to a fundamental pedagogical question. In large part, our findings are in line with the results of previous socialization research, which shows that especially religiously committed parents ‚produce' religiously committed children.[20] That is to say, only parents who attend church on a weekly basis, i.e. core evangelical and core mainline Christians, and who regularly read the Bible

20 Vgl. *Hunsberger, Bruce / Brown, L. B.*: Religious Socialization, Apostasy, and the Impact on Family Background. In: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 23 (1984) 239–251; *Myers, Scott*: An Interactive Model of Religiosity Inheritance. The Importance of Family Context. In: American Sociological Review 61 (1996) 858–866; *Vermeer / Janssen / de Hart* 2011 [Anm. 9].

bring forth religious children. But in addition to this more common insight, our findings at the same time show that also more strict parents, who are convinced that their religion represents the unique truth, bring forth more religiously committed children. Especially this latter result confronts us with a fundamental pedagogical dilemma regarding religious education in school.

The religious socialization of children not only takes place in the family or the religious community, but in school as well. That is not to say, that schools are always that effective or influential in this respect. Table 3 shows, for instance, that being deliberately sent to a religious school has no effect on the church attendance of evangelical children nor on the church attendance of the children of mainline Christians. Still, in many European countries, religious education in school is originally organized to support the religious upbringing of children in a specific religious tradition. This is especially the case in countries where religious education in school is still officially confessional and organized along denominational lines; like in the Netherlands, Belgium and for the most part in Germany as well. Although this does not necessarily mean that the actual practice of religious education in these countries is also confessional. Ongoing secularization has resulted in numerous classrooms populated by pupils without a religious affiliation and, consequently, to a ‚modernization' of religious education towards approaches such as interreligious learning, worldview education or citizenship education; see Franken and Vermeer for recent developments in Belgium and the Netherlands and Knauth for similar developments in Germany.[21] But despite these ‚modernizing' developments, in several European countries religious education officially remains a confessional subject under the supervision of religious authorities. But what, then, should the policy of these religious authorities be in light of the above findings?

In our opinion, the above findings confront religious authorities with a genuine dilemma. According to the Dutch pedagogue Meijer, in a democratic society education should transmit and endorse basic values like equality, mutual understanding and tolerance.[22] In view of religious education, this means that pupils should become aware of the historicity, relativity and contextual nature of their own religious tradition in order to develop a reflexive attitude towards this tradition. An approach Meijer refers to as the 'reflexive transmission of culture' and which she contrasts with the transmission of culture and religion as self-evident.[23] The latter Meijer understands as the transmission of a religious tradition as absolute, immutable and true. However, the above findings suggest that such a reflexive transmission of religion and culture may not be a very favorable approach in view of the religious socialization of pupils. For, if the intergenerational religious transmission is indeed advanced by a mono-religious orientation of parents, as our findings point out, emphasizing the reflexive transmission of religion in school may very well hinder the religious socialization of pupils. And this not only goes for the religious socialization of children of evangelical Christians but of mainline Christians as well. For, as we have seen, having parents with a mono-religious orientation even facilitates the intergenerational religious transmission among core mainline Christians! Hence, the approach towards religious education that seems desirable from a pedagogical perspective, may in the end prove to be counterproductive when it comes to the transmission and preservation of the Christian tradition.

Our research into the determinants of conservative church growth thus in the end also invokes important educational questions concerning the challenges confessional religious education faces in the context of secular Europe. Or to be more precise, our research especially challenges the confessional nature of religious education. That is to say, if religious education in school is still seen or meant to (also) facilitate the religious socialization of youths, it is probably best to adopt a more straightforward mono-religious, ‚education into religion' approach. But the latter is no longer common practice. In the Netherlands, for example, especially in schools affiliated with the more mainline churches, religious education nowadays is for the most part being taught according to the principles of liberal education and aims to endorse religious literacy, critical thinking and autonomy. But no matter how justified this approach is from a pedagogical point of view, it will not serve the confessional purposes certain religious authorities may still attach to religious education in school.[24] Thus in a context of an ongoing decline of mainline churches and the persistence of more orthodox and conservative churches, especially the leadership of the larger mainline churches face a pressing dilemma concerning religious education in school. Should it be more confessional in view of the religious socialization of youths or should it be more pedagogically oriented and aiming at the general formation of pupils? This is a genuine dilemma. For, as our findings suggest, you cannot have both at the same time.

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21 Vgl. *Franken, Leni/Vermeer, Paul*: Deconfessionalising RE in pillarised education systems. A case study of Belgium and the Netherlands. In: British Journal of Religious Education, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2017.1405792. (2017); *Knauth, Thorsten*: Religious Education in Germany: Contribution to Dialogue or Source of Conflict? A Historical and Contextual Analysis of its Development since the 1960s. In: *Jackson, Robert/Miedema, Siebren/Weisse, Wolfram* u. a. (Hg.): Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates, Münster 2007, 243–265.

22 Vgl. *Meijer, Wilna*: Traditie en toekomst van het islamitisch onderwijs, Amsterdam 2006.

23 Vgl. ebd., 225–228.

24 Vgl. *MacMullen, Ian*: Faith in Schools? Autonomy, Citizenship, and Religious Education in the Liberal State, Princeton 2007, 169–175.